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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000361

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: BAHRAINI LEADERS DISCUSS REFORM AND IRAN WITH
NEA/ARPI DIRECTOR MISENHEIMER

REF: A. MANAMA 270

[B](#). MANAMA 228

[C](#). MANAMA 164

[D](#). MANAMA 111

[E](#). 04 MANAMA 1878

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#). (C) GOB officials expressed their commitment to continued political and economic reform in the kingdom and advocated a diplomatic solution to the disagreement with Iran over its nuclear program in meetings with visiting NEA/ARPI Director Alan Misenheimer February 21. Members of parliament also indicated their commitment to reform, and added that opposition societies seeking to amend the constitution should engage parliament on the matter instead of taking their concerns to the king or the international community. The parliamentarians were fairly confident that the societies which boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections would participate in the 2006 elections, but said ultimately the majority of the boycotters would do whatever Bahrain's leading Shi'a clerics advised.

Finance Minister Discusses Economic Reforms and Iran

[2](#). (C) During a meeting with Minister of Finance Sheikh Ahmed bin Mohamed Al Khalifa, the Minister stressed that economic progress means nothing unless it creates a better standard of living for all people. Helping Bahrainis is the number one reason for the GOB's plans to unveil new strategies relating to labor, the economy, and education this year. Reform is challenging and sometimes painful, but in the long run it is absolutely necessary and good for the kingdom. On Iran, the Minister said Bahrain had experienced ups and downs in its relationship with its neighbor, but that for now Iran is not creating any problems in the Gulf. (Note: This assessment is at variance with the GOB's increasing concern with Iran's influence locally, Ref A.) Competing groups in Iran are vying for influence, and a hardline U.S. position only strengthens support for extremist elements. He advocated giving Iranians more time to sort out their issues internally.

MFA Undersecretary Comments on Terrorism and Iran

[3](#). (C) Ministry of Foreign Affairs Assistant Undersecretary for Coordination and Follow Up Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Mubarak Al Khalifa told Misenheimer that although terrorist attacks are always a possibility, Bahrain is in a better situation than its neighbors. Misenheimer mentioned the case of the terrorist suspects currently on trial in Bahrain and emphasized the need for Bahrain to send a strong message on combating terrorism. On Iran, Sheikh Abdul Aziz commented that the IAEA should play a more prominent role, and urged the USG to wait until it had verifiable information before making conclusions on Iran. Bahrain currently enjoys a good relationship with Iran, and he hoped the USG would consult Bahrain before taking big decisions with regard to Iran. Sheikh Abdul Aziz affirmed his support for a diplomatic solution to problems with Iran, and said the U.S. should carefully consider the regional consequences of a military attack.

Lively Discussion on Domestic Affairs

[4](#). (C) During a lunch hosted by the DCM, the Ambassador, Misenheimer, and PolOff engaged three Shura Council members and two Council of Representatives (COR) members in a discussion on domestic issues. The parliamentarians were united in their view that participants in the recent conference on constitutional reform should take their issues to parliament instead of appealing directly to the king (Ref

B). They noted that some activists were seeking international support on the constitutional issue, and emphasized that it is an internal matter and should be treated as such.

15. (C) The parliamentarians unanimously called for full Bahraini participation in next year's elections. They noted a growing interest within Al Wifaq and other boycotting societies to participate in the 2006 elections, but commented that ultimately many Shi'a will follow the advice of their religious leaders (Ref D). They worried, however, that if Al Wifaq and other boycotting societies decide to recommend that their members participate in the elections, the parliament could be full of people who will focus on religion instead of reform and economic growth. They said Bahrain is not ready for a totally elected parliament, agreeing that the appointed Shura Council provides a needed balance to religious factions in the Council of Representatives (COR).

16. (C) The parliamentarians discussed the possibility of a quota for women in the 2006 elections. Dr. Bahiya Al Jishi, one of six women appointed to the Shura Council, was against the quota on legal grounds. COR member Fareed Ghazi said women can win seats in the election without a quota, and the others agreed. Several parliamentarians noted that some of the more religious political societies should take a firm stand in support of women as candidates.

17. (C) On the closure of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), most of the parliamentarians agreed that human rights organizations in Bahrain are more effective when they play a less political role (Ref C). They commented that human rights activists should push for reform, but not in a way that creates controversy. They said that BCHR board member Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja, who was arrested in September 2004 following a speech against the Prime Minister, crossed the line. Shura Council member Faisal Fouladh, who recently helped establish the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society, argued that the GOB turned Al Khawaja into a hero by arresting him and created an enormous amount of negative international press on Bahrain (Ref E). He said the GOB should take a more tolerant view of human rights groups in the future.

MONROE